

JOHN WILLIAMS: THE MARTYR MISSIONARY OF POLYNESIA

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The following biographical sketch is from *Heroes of Faith on Pioneer Trails* by E. Myers Harrison, former pastor of Judson College Church, Rangoon, Burma; copyright 1945 by Moody Bible Institute. A reprint is available from Bethel Baptist Print Ministry. The phone number is 519-652-2619.

These are excellent stories to read in family devotions or to use in other contexts with children. It is important to keep the Greatest Work on Earth, which is missionary work, before our children and youth and to pray that the Lord will send forth laborers into His harvest. The essence of fruitful Christian living is death to self and surrender to God's will, and few things exhibit this more powerfully than sacrificial missionary work. Sadly, very few Bible believing Christians today are familiar with the challenging stories of influential pioneer missionaries of past days.

The name of John Williams is one of the most illustrious in all the annals of missionary heroism. Just as the apostle Paul went on long, hazardous missionary journeys in the Graeco-Roman world, so John Williams went on missionary journeys no less arduous or perilous as he sailed among the multitudinous isles of the South Sea--that vast area known as Polynesia.

On May 24, 1830, John Williams sailed from Raiatea in *The Messenger of Peace*, a vessel of between sixty and seventy tons which he had built with his own hands without skilled assistance, without any training in shipbuilding, and with only a few simple tools at his disposal. It was truly a miracle ship. A few days later *The Messenger of Peace* reached Mangaia, one of the Hervey Islands (Navigator Islands). As the white missionary and his dark-skinned converts disembarked and approached the shore in a large canoe, he could not but wonder whether the reception they would receive would be as hostile and fierce as that which had been tendered on his first visit several years earlier.

Knowing the deep-seated suspicions which the South Sea islanders had toward foreigners, and sensing the spiritual enrichment which would ensue to his converts, Williams had evolved the plan of letting his native Christians volunteer for missionary service and, after selecting those most suited for this work, of landing them on various islands with a view to evangelizing the inhabitants. On the occasion of his previous visit to Mangaia, Williams had sent on shore several native teachers and their wives along with various items of personal property and certain presents for the chief and his

numerous wives. Just as soon as they stepped on shore, there was a general seizure of their persons and property. One of them had a saw, which the natives grasped, broke into three pieces and tied to their ears as ornaments. Their cocoanut oil, their beds, their pigs--everything was stolen, even the clothes they wore. The men were about to be strangled and the women to be brutally mistreated, when Williams came with a boat and rescued them. Subsequently, two unmarried teachers courageously landed on the island, not knowing what fate awaited them.

Now the white missionary, accompanied by King Makea of Rarotonga and other native Christians, was approaching the island again. How would they be received? What had happened to the two teachers who, for weal or woe, had cast their lot with these savages?

A joyous answer was soon forthcoming. Upon landing, they found that, although one teacher had died and the other had been repeatedly robbed and threats had been made to kill him and use "his skull as a drinking cup," gradually a heartening change had come over many of the people, so that they diligently attended to Christian instruction and erected a large, attractive church.

Going to the house of the chief, Williams urged upon him and his followers the mighty claims of love divine. Thereupon King Makea of Rarotonga and his company of Christians entered fervently upon the task of converting the chief and the rest of the heathen. Williams speaks of "the merciful violence with which the Christians sought to persuade them to embrace the truth," and adds: "I believe they slept but little during the night; for, when as 12 o'clock we stretched out on our mats to rest our weary limbs, neither the zeal of our companions nor the interest of the listening heathen appeared in any measure to have abated."

A public service was held and 800 people were in attendance. Many of these were still heathen and, having long beards and long hair and being dressed in all the fantastic wildness of savage taste, presented a striking contrast to the Christian part of the congregation. "They behaved, however, with decorum," says Williams, "while I preached to them from my favorite text: "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15).

According to his own explicit testimony, 1 Timothy 1:15 was the favorite text of John Williams. This great text opened to his eyes the value of a soul' first his own sinful soul, then of all souls everywhere, in the light of all that was involved in love and sacrifice in the stupendous pronouncement, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." When a partaker of redeeming grace centers his thoughts upon the words of 1 Timothy 1:15, he readily discerns three considerations which must have influenced John Williams to regard the text as of superlative worth:

1. The text says that Christ Jesus came to save the chief of sinners.

2. The text suggests that Christ came to save a world of sinners.

3. The text implies that a great love leads to great sacrifice. CHRIST JESUS CAME TO SAVE THE CHIEF OF SINNERS

John Williams was born June 29, 1796, in the village of Tottenham, England, six miles north of London. His mother was a woman of prayer and true piety, but his father was an unbeliever sadly addicted to strong drink. After completing an elementary education, John was apprenticed at fourteen to a London ironmonger, for whom he worked a period of six years in a great city then, as now, was fraught with manifold temptations, and at the age of seventeen John Williams was associated with a group of dissolute youth, much to the grief of his mother who gave herself to persistent prayer on his behalf. She knew-and he knew-that what he needed was not the superficial whitewash of reformation but the "washing of regeneration" within. "My course of life at this period," he wrote later, "was very wicked but not flagrantly immoral. I was a lover of pleasure more than a lover of God; I often scoffed at the name of Christ and His religion; and I totally neglected those things which alone can afford solid consolation."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon often referred to the story of John Williams' conversion, for in certain respects it closely resembled his own. The evening of January 30, 1814, was cold and frosty. A heavy sleet had fallen; nevertheless, throngs of people were hurrying down the streets in answer to the melodious call of the church bells. One of the worshipers, Mrs. Enoch Tonkin, was struck by the stalwart appearance of a young man who seemed to be waiting aimlessly at a corner on City Road. As the street light fell upon his face, she recognized him as one of her husband's apprentices. When she inquired why he was loitering at that place, he frankly stated that he and some of his friends were to meet at that corner, after which they were to spend the evening in a tavern not far away. However, the fixed time had passed and he was vexed because his friends had not appeared. Mrs. Tonkin urged him to accompany her to Moorfield's (formerly Whitefield's) tabernacle. He at length consented to go, with considerable diffidence and rather out of mortification than from a desire to worship. The sermon that night, delivered by Rev. Timothy East, was based upon Matthew 16:26. It was used by the Holy Spirit to cause conviction, and ever afterward Williams pointed back to this momentous occasion as the time when God's great sunrise dawned upon his soul.

Twenty-four years later, during his only visit to England and shortly before returning to Polynesia, he stood in the pulpit at Moorfield's tabernacle and told a vast concourse of people of that supreme experience. "I have in my view at the present moment," said he, "the door by which I entered; I have all the circumstances of that important era in my history vividly impressed upon my mind; I have in my eye at this instant a particular spot on which I took my seat. I have also a distinct impression of the powerful sermon that was preached that evening by the excellent Mr. East. That good man took for his text that

night one of the most impressive questions of inspired writ: For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? God was pleased in His own gracious providence to influence my mind so powerfully that I forsook all my worldly companions, became a teacher in the Sabbath school and attended diligently to the means of grace. Throughout eternity I shall rejoice that I was led to see that I was the chief of sinners, that even so great a sinner had a soul of priceless worth and that through Christ there was salvation for even me."

A sinner of the deepest die!

A soul of priceless worth!

A Saviour of infinite mercy!

An eternity in which to rejoice!

CHRIST CAME TO SAVE A WORLD OF SINNERS

There was a trinity of texts especially prized by John Williams: 1 Timothy 1:15, Matthew 16:26, and John 3:16. All three speak of "the world." The first expressly avoids any limitation of the scope of Christ's redemptive mission by saying that He came into "the world," not merely to some local area such as Galilee or Palestine. The last says plainly, "God so loved the world." And while the second explicitly states that the soul is of far greater value than "the whole world" of material objects and sensuous enjoyments, it does not discourage one who has saved "his own soul" from seeking to impart to "the world" the knowledge of the soul's surpassing worth. In other words, while it would be colossal folly to exchange the soul for the world, there is no reason why he should not--and many good reasons why he should--win both "his own soul" and "the world," the world of precious souls for which Christ suffered, bled, and died.

Williams was not long in following out the logic of his conversion experience and of his master text. "My heart was frequently with the poor heathen," he states. "I examined my motives and found that a sense of the value of an immortal soul--the thousands that were daily passing from time into eternity--and a conviction of the debt of love I owe to God for His goodness, in making me savingly acquainted with the things which belong to my everlasting peace, were the considerations by which my desire was created."

Where could be found a more discerning statement of the incentives to missionary service?

A heart that longs after the poor heathen!

A sense of the value of an immortal soul!

A conviction of love's debt for God's saving goodness!

An acquaintance with the things that issue in everlasting peace!

English boys who were born toward the close of the 18th century were captivated by the daring adventures and audacious exploits of Captain Cook. His sensational discoveries and tragic death turned all thoughts toward a vast new world of coral reefs and cannibal islands in the far-off Southern Seas. One of these boys was William Carey, another was John Williams. "If I had the means," said Carey, "I would go to the South Seas and commence a mission at Tahiti." He went instead to India, leaving to John Williams the wide seas and countless islands of Polynesia.

September 30, 1816, at a crowded service, the London Missionary Society set aside nine men for missionary work, one of them being Robert Moffatt, another being John Williams. To the latter the venerable Dr. Waugh said: "Go, my dear young brother, and if your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth, let it be with telling poor sinners of the love of Jesus Christ; and if your arms drop from off your shoulders, let it be with knocking at men's hearts to gain admittance for Him there."

With this solemn charge ringing in his ears, John Williams set sail for the South Seas, accompanied by his young bride, Mary Chauner. "I have no other desire," he affirmed, "than to be the means of winning sinners to Christ." He was thinking of the text, of the salvation that extended even to the chief of sinners and of the incomparable privilege of seeking to bring the world's sinners into the presence of the world's Saviour!

They left England November 17, 1816. Exactly one year later they reached Tahiti. After some months of intensive language study, they settled in the Society Islands, first in Huahine, then in Raiatea. While in Huahine Williams had the exhilarating experience that comes in time to every new missionary--that of proclaiming the gospel for the first time in the native tongue. His emotions were deeply stirred and the significance of the occasion was further heightened by the arrival of a singular delegation. While praying, "Lord, open the hearts of the people to the saving message of Thy truth," he heard a commotion outside the door. Upon going out, he found a group of swarthy natives, headed by a man of gigantic proportions.

"Who are you and what do you wish?" asked the missionary.

"I am Tamatoa, king of Raiatea, and these are my chiefs. We have braved the boisterous waves of the sea to come to this place in search of a missionary to take with us to tell our poor people of Christ and lead them out of darkness."

Williams' heart was pounding and his eyes were filled with tears as he led the heathen delegation to the service and as he stood up to tell "the old, old story of Jesus and His love." And what was his text on this auspicious and memorable occasion? Let him answer in his own words: "The first sermon I ever preached in the native language was from the text--This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I love that doctrine, and I am resolved never to preach a sermon in any language unless salvation through the blood of Christ is its sum and substance. It is a truth worth carrying to the whole world."

A doctrine to be loved and preached!

A truth worth carrying to the whole world!

A saying worthy of all acceptance!

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!

Since there were other missionaries in Huahine, John Williams answered Tamatoa's call and settled in Raiatea. While arduously but happily engaged in pointing the Raiateans to the Lamb of God, he received from England the news of his mother's death. He recognized that his father's heart would be softened by this sorrow and he wrote a long letter of tender solicitude relative to his salvation. "My dear afflicted father," he writes, "I would encourage you, by the compassion of Christ, by all His promises and by all the cleansing, meritorious effects of His precious blood to seek most earnestly that forgiveness which He delights to extend even to the chief of sinners." The familiar text! While seeking to gain entrance to the hearts of the heathen on one side of the world and to win his father on the other, the missionary's mind was constantly reverting to the sublime truths and precious promises of 1 Timothy 1:15.

In time a church was formed. But the missionary could scarcely rejoice in the progress of the gospel on one island, for thinking of the thousands of islands where the redeeming message was unknown. The vision that lured him on is indicated in his own words:

"A missionary was never designed by Jesus Christ to gather a congregation of a hundred or two natives and sit down at his ease, as contented as if every sinner was converted, while thousands around him are eating each other's flesh and drinking each other's blood, living and dying without the gospel. For my own part, I cannot content myself within the narrow limits of a single reef.

His heart was set on nothing less than winning for Christ "the kingdoms of this world." So he built The Messenger of Peace and sailed from island to island, preaching, settling native missionaries, establishing missions, and translating the Scriptures. In the course of his journeys he discovered Rarotonga, a large and beautiful island which had escaped the

vigilant eyes of Captain Cook. After seven months' residence on this island he was able to report an attendance of two thousand people at the Sunday services. In 1827 he wrote: "I have the pleasure of looking round upon ten thousand people to whom the Lord has been pleased to communicate His gospel, through my instrumentality; but I am not content. I wish to do more, much more."

In many instances he jeopardized his life to introduce the gospel among savages and cannibals, then returned later to rejoice over the marvelous transformations that had taken place. Soon after the first native missionary was settled in Samoa, a war was fought among the tribes, and the victors, not knowing Christ or His Spirit, determined to take vengeance in their usual manner upon their captured enemies. With this in view, they kindled several immense fires and then, with every expression of diabolical delight, they flung men, women, and children into the flames. A few years later these people were "new creatures in Christ," singing the songs of the redeemed, living devoted Christian lives, and worshipping in their own beautiful church erected on the very spot where, as heathens, they had burned their enemies alive.

When Williams and his colleague, Mr. Barff, visited the island of Atiu, they found the people intensely eager to learn of Jesus and His love. Indeed, so hungry were they for the gospel that they would not let both missionaries sleep at the same time. As soon as one of them fell asleep from exhaustion, they woke the other!

In various islands which Williams visited, snakes, lizards, rats, dogs, sharks, eels, and other such creatures were the objects of native adoration and it was the general belief that these gods were never so well-pleased as when their altars were stained with human blood or the bodies of human victims were hanging from the branches of the trees in their sacred groves. In the Fiji islands the chiefs had from twenty to one hundred wives, according to their rank. Upon the death of a principal chief four of his wives were publicly strangled and buried with him in the same grave.

The practice of infanticide was shockingly prevalent. Because of various superstitions, the natives often destroyed as many as six, and in some instances as many as twelve or fifteen, of their children. Williams had as a servant in his home a woman who in her heathen days had followed the profession of destroying infants. The depths of human depravity were unveiled as she described the practices and methods of her former art. She first broke the victim's fingers and toes; if this did not cause the infant's death, she tried other methods, finally resorting to strangling.

On one occasion the missionary was asked to call on a woman, a chief's wife, who was dying. "Oh, my sins, my sins," moaned the wretched woman. "I have destroyed sixteen of my own children and now I am about to die." Williams says in his Journal, "As soon as my feelings would allow me, I directed her to the faithful saying, which is worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I directed her thought

to that blood which cleanses from all sin and she died about eight days later, animated with the hope that her sins, though many, would all be forgiven her. And what but the gospel could have brought such consolation? I believe that, without the grand truth of pardon by the blood of Christ, I might have reasoned with her from that time to the present in vain."

The grand truth of pardon by the blood of Christ!

The grand truth that her sins, though many, would all be forgiven!

The grand truth that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!

1 Timothy 1:15 was forever on his lips because it was so deeply embedded in his heart.

A GREAT LOVE LEADS TO A GREAT SACRIFICE

Williams clearly recognized that the coming of Christ "into the world to save sinners" was motivated by an infinite love that shrank not at an infinite sacrifice, hence his frequent references to "the love of Christ" and "the shed blood of Christ." And, his own life being animated by a great love, he was ready for any sacrifice for his Lord.

In November, 1839, he sailed on his last voyage.

He was going to visit New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, and other islands of western Polynesia where lived the fiercest savages and cannibals of all that vast world of coral reefs. Most of the ships sailing the southern seas were loaded with rum and firearms which would contribute to the further degradation of the natives and to their more rapid extermination in their sanguinary conflicts. When passing ships inquired as to what sort of cargo he had, Williams gave the startling answer: "Missionaries and Bibles." With Raiatea of the Society group as his first base of operations, Raratonga of the Hervey group as his second and Upolu of the Samoan group as his third, he had been able to spread the gospel to most of the islands in each of these groups. Now he was sailing on the longest voyage of his extraordinary career, intent upon settling native teachers on many savage islands and upon winning another large section of "the world" which Christ came to save. He was elated by the prospect of new conquests for his Lord. And yet he knew the perils that lay ahead. A presentiment of momentous danger gripped him and in his last message before sailing he had spoken on Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders, stressing the words, ye "shall see my face no more" (Acts 20:25). As he approached the New Hebrides he wrote in his Journal, "The approaching week is to me the most important of my life." It was indeed, for a few days later when he landed on Erromanga the cannibals beat him to death with their clubs and then feasted on his body.

In seeking to win the world for which Christ died, John Williams had exhibited a great love and had made a great sacrifice. Who follows in his train?

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